DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 284 CE 081 469

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TITLE Career Exploration by Adults. Practice Application Brief No. 14.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0013
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ericacve.org/fulltext.asp.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Programs; Adults; *Career Change; Career Choice; *Career Counseling; *Career Development; *Career Exploration; Counseling Techniques; *Counselor Role; Family Influence; Occupational Information; *Self Evaluation (Individuals)

ABSTRACT

In an era of rapid social and economic changes, the demand for adult career exploration services is growing in career-tech and one-stop centers and community college and university reentry programs. Career exploration is a process of acquiring self-knowledge and career knowledge and using this knowledge to formulate plans and prepare for a career. It is a learning process embedded in a larger context of growth and development, often triggered by life events such as divorce or job layoff. Career exploration is different for adults than for children and adolescents, since adults have a pool of life and work experiences to bring to the process, and adults make more pragmatic education and career decisions based on the circumstances of their lives. Adults who engage in career exploration are more driven by natural curiosity, initiative, adaptability, and the ability to overcome uncertainty and fear, while exploratory activity may be hindered by self-criticism, insecurity, and guilt. These external resources also influence career exploration: resistance or encouragement from family, friends, and supervisors; financial resources; and role models and mentors. Adult educators, human resource development specialists, and career development practitioners can help adults to develop new skills and knowledge to make career transitions. They can provide support for career transitions. Techniques that professionals can use to help adults explore careers include "possible selves"; the "Discovery Path" workshop for women; experiential activities; and more traditional career exploration activities, such as assessment tools and researching. (Contains 21 references.) (KC)

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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF NO. 14

Career Exploration by Adults

by Sandra Kerka

2001

Dressing up for Halloween is increasingly popular among adults. Bergamo (2000) sees this as a sign of the continuing need to explore work and personal identity. "Make-believe is just a gentler word for career exploration. At some point we decide what we're going to be when we grow up and stop pretending—or exploring—otherwise" (online, n.p.). Career exploration is a process undertaken by children and adolescents to test ideas about "what I want to be when I grow up." In the contemporary environment, career exploration is also an essential part of a lifelong process of adaptation, growth, and change. The capacity to explore the environment and one's internal psychological resources is an important adaptive response to an era of rapid social and economic changes (Blustein 1997). Thus, the demand for adult career exploration services is growing in career-tech and one-stop centers and community college and university reentry programs (Husain 1999). This ***Brief*** examines why and how adults explore potential careers and how practitioners can support them in this process.

Rediscovering the Self

Career exploration is a process of acquiring *self-knowledge* (awareness of one's skills, abilities, interests, values, goals, and dreams), and *career knowledge* (information about the world of work and the skill and education requirements, conditions, and outlook of specific jobs). This knowledge is used to formulate plans and prepare for a career. Career exploration is a learning process embedded in a larger context of growth and development. Like other adult learning projects, it is often triggered by life events such as divorce, job layoff, or not getting a promotion. Individuals may feel that their work is out of sync with their changed values, perspectives, and goals (Hudson 1999). They may "examine the values, dreams, or other vital aspects of their personalities that they have lost or given up by choosing their current occupations" (Perosa and Perosa 1997, p. 152).

Metaphors such as *exploration*, *quest*, and *vision quest* are often used to describe this process of life review that may be impelled by growing awareness that one's social or vocational identity is no longer congruent with the inner self (Young and Rodgers 1997), that the current job situation is far from one's life dream or goal (Donner and Wheeler 1999), or that past career choices were based on external rewards such as income and status instead of pursuit of one's "bliss" (Clark 1999-2000). Thus, exploration "may occur in any life stage, and particularly during the period preceding and following entry into a new life stage" (Blustein 1997, p. 261). Now that all the "rules" about careers have changed, more and more adults revisit the career exploration stage several times in their lives. Not only does career information change constantly, but the acquisition of self-knowledge is also a continuous process, not limited to a one-time quest for a good career fit (Robitschek 1997).

Career exploration is different for adults than for children and adolescents. Adults have a pool of life and work experiences that make up their "life-career," the totality of the positions and roles they occupy (Robitschek 1997). For adults, exploration takes place across life roles, and exploratory behaviors may be useful for considering new roles in other domains besides work, e.g., political activity, leisure, or retirement (Blustein 1997). Adults may undertake exploratory behavior to maintain their current position while preparing for retirement, get ready for a new occupation, or become more innovative in their current position (Niles et al. 1999). Compared to younger counterparts, adults make more pragmatic education and career decisions, have more realistic self-concepts based on richer life experiences, and are motivated to seek new careers that better fit personal values and involve meaningful work (Gianakos 1996).

Equipped for the Journey

What qualities help or hinder the career quest? What resources do adults need to take on their journey? Historically, the explorer has been a person driven by natural curiosity, initiative, adaptability, and the ability to overcome uncertainty and fear. Research shows that such characteristics are predictors of career exploratory behavior. Differences in exploratory activity are associated with differences in personal growth initiative (active, intentional engagement in personal growth), information processing style, motivational orientation, tolerance for ambiguity and risk, and self-efficacy (Blustein 1997; Gianakos 1996; Robitschek 1997; Young and Rodgers 1997). Individuals who are more likely to engage in career exploration and planning recognize their developmental needs and have a positive orientation to lifelong learning (Allen et al. 1999).

On the other hand, exploratory activity may be hindered by self-criticism, insecurity, and guilt (Clark 1999-2000; Young and Rodgers 1997). Midlife adults in Behrens and Altman's (2000) study lacked confidence in their ability to attain career satisfaction and were concerned that changing their careers would involve financial loss, hard work, tough decisions, pressure to find fulfillment, and confusion. They held back from changing careers because they feared failure, financial ruin, and starting over. Other barriers include lack of clarity about strengths and weaknesses, values, and interests; negative feelings about oneself and family situation; poor problem-solving skills; and anxiety about making choices (Lucas 1999).

External resources also influence career exploration: resistance or encouragement from family, friends, supervisors, and others; financial resources; and role models and mentors (Allen et al. 1999; Clark 1999-2000; Young and Rodgers 1997). A social constructionist perspective suggests that career exploration takes different forms and functions in different cultures and time periods (Blustein 1997). Experiences of racism, ageism, sexism, poverty, and lack of access to opportunity can hinder exploration. For example, self-efficacy is developed through cumulative learning experiences that lead to the belief or expectation that one can successfully perform a specific task or activity (Sullivan and Mahalik 2000). Women's socialization into feminine gender roles provides less access to the sources of information important to the development of strong expectations of efficacy for career achievement and success (ibid.). Awareness of the complex web of social and cultural influences surrounding an individual can help practitioners identify resources and methods to offset the barriers to career exploration.

Techniques to Assist Career Exploration

Adult educators, human resource development specialists, and career development practitioners have an important role in "helping to both develop new skills and knowledge to *make* the career transition possible and providing support and advocacy to emphasize that the career transition *is* possible" (Boulmetis 1997, p. 12). They can provide learning situations that foster the development of critical exploratory skills such as reflection, visualization, and goal setting. Although educators' role is not meant to be therapeutic, Boulmetis notes that adults enrolling in education and training programs may rely on adult educators and trainers to address their career development needs. Examples of some techniques follow.

Possible selves are conceptions of "what people believe they may become, are hopeful of becoming, or are fearful of becoming" (Plimmer et al. 1999-2000, p. 87). They are a way of projecting alternative selves that may help adults rediscover other interests and enable them to think beyond the current job or career field (Scherer n.d.). Sources of information about possible selves include enduring life themes (patterns of skills, interests, and environments), childhood accomplishments, and learning experiences. These self-images can be crystallized using techniques such as guided autobiography (documenting peak experiences; career daydreams; catalytic people, events, or stories in one's life), reflective journals, creative visualization, and future scenarios (e.g., imagine what would be said at your retirement dinner). As Scherer reports, possible selves do not necessarily result in career change; they may lead to the discovery of creative, interpersonal, or technological interests that contribute to lifelong learning and growth.

The *Discovery Path*, a workshop for women nearing the "Third Age," uses the metaphor of an exploratory journey through the phases of (1) self-discovery—Where have I been? Where am I now? (2) vision crafting—Where do I want to go? What hinders me? and (3) grounding the vision—How do I get there? (Donner and Wheeler 1999). The facilitated small group uses such methods as journal writing, drawing, and discussion in a nurturing learning environment to explore struggles, fears, dreams, and discoveries. Because the "return to community" is a crucial step in an explorer's journey, follow-up group sessions and individual coaching help keep participants focused on what they learn and how they can apply it to their career and life goals.

Experiential activities provide ways to practice new roles and behaviors while reducing the uncertainty and fear that can accompany exploration. Pope and Minor's (2000) book offers a variety of career development activities useful for exploration; examples include career genograms, a values auction, and a dream vacation activity. Because self-efficacy influences career exploration behavior, Sullivan and Mahalik (2000) match experiential activities to the components of self-efficacy identified by Bandura: (1) successful performance accomplishments can be identified by constructing a vocational history in which previous task mastery experiences are revisited; (2) vicarious/observational learning can be accomplished through informational interviews and reading about other people's career decision-making processes; (3) emotional arousal activities include anxiety management and relaxation techniques and learning to monitor self-talk; and (4) verbal persuasion and encouragement can be provided through facilitators' positive affirmations and encouragement and participants giving each other feedback and support.

Practitioners can also guide adults through more traditional career exploration activities: using adult-appropriate assessment tools (Niles et al. 1999; Perosa and Perosa 1997); researching career information in libraries and with career exploration software (Husain 1999); and using appropriate and carefully selected online tools and resources (Connick 1999; Harris-Bowlsbey, Dikel, and Sampson 1998).

As adults develop their perspectives on life and work throughout the life span, career exploration is one of several tools they can use to improve their well-being and adaptability. Maintaining an exploratory attitude throughout life may be essential equipment for the journey through the unknowns of the 21st century (Blustein 1997).

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. ***Practice Application Briefs*** may be freely reproduced and are available at <http://ericacve.org/fulltext.asp>.

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